

## A Story That is Not so 'Simple': Politics of Desire, Disruption and Education in Inchbald's *A Simple Story*

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"I see female fiction beginning with an analysis of *female signs* and *masks*, ... effects of *sexual desire* and manipulation. It then proceeds to, *preaching ...rewarding self- sacrifice and restraint...*" (my emphasis) ---Janet Todd<sup>i</sup>

"We do not yet know, perhaps, how to read Inchbald full,..." ---Terry Castle<sup>ii</sup>

Most readers know eighteenth century woman writer, Elizabeth Inchbald (1753-1821) primarily from Jane Austen's discreditable reference to her comedy in *Mansfield park* (1814). Works especially comedies and amatory fiction, of women writers like Inchbald, Eliza Haywood and Delarivier Manley have been systematically suppressed by the conventional literary canon as they explore the transgressive terrain of the female desire, instead of propagating ideals of domesticity, rational education and socialization for women. This paper intends to discuss the radical politics of the "a small masterpiece" that has been "neglected far too long" (Castle 290).

Inchbald led an unconventional life as she was a young widow who chose not to remarry but live independently by earning her living as an actress and a writer. She struggled for fulfilling her desires. When thirteen, she declared that "she would rather die than live any longer without seeing the world."<sup>iii</sup> She left home alone for London at the age of eighteen to become an actress despite her stammer. Henry Wigstead's satirical print of Inchbald (1793) depicts her living alone in squalor with a bottle of gin and Earl of Rochester's erotic poetry on the table. Gin, erotic poetry, and the presence of a Defoe's *Moll Flanders*,<sup>iv</sup> a prostitute, create an impression of a woman who is outside the bounds of domesticity. Reference to *Moll Flanders*, a sexualized woman, also evokes an image of a female desiring subject who struggles for autonomy in the patriarchal world. This print throws into relief eighteenth century's discomfort with women who live life on their own terms without masculine protection.

Like in Inchbald's life, female desire and transgression are among the primary concerns of *A Simple Story* (1791). Todd's observation becomes useful in reading Inchbald's representation of the mother-daughter pair in the novel. Inchbald explores "sexual desire" overtly in the case of rebellious Miss Milner, who is 'punished,' and appears to 'reward' the seemingly passive Matilda. This paper intends to unearth Inchbald's radical politics by probing into this apparently conventional moral trajectory. It is a radical text that deals with women's desires, sexuality, transgression and struggle to attain autonomy in the patriarchal/aristocratic world despite their disempowered position. Furthermore, since Inchbald was a theatre actress, dramatist, translator and a theatre critic apart from being a novelist, it would be interesting to study the manner in which this influenced the form of her novels. This part of the paper discusses Inchbald's innovativeness in writing a highly 'theatrical' novel by using dramatic conventions like gestures to demonstrate the inner state of characters. I also wish to explore how Inchbald also reworks different genres like sentimental fiction and novel of education. The second part of the paper seeks to analyze Dorriforth and Matilda as

different kinds of desiring subjects. Unlike Miss Milner, who passionately expresses her desires, Dorriforth attempts to repress them while Matilda it seems masks them. Closely related to the trajectory of this desiring subject is the issue of women's education which was one of the important concerns of the Jacobin women writers like Wollstonecraft.<sup>v</sup> The last part of the paper explores Inchbald's ambiguous treatment of the issue of education where all the models of education such as Miss Milner's Protestant boarding school learning and Dorriforth and Matilda's Catholic training are laid open to questioning.

Miss Milner, unlike the heroines of the Sentimental novel and Conduct books, is no paragon of virtue.<sup>vi</sup> She is impulsive, haughty and coquettish. Apart from Rousseau's Julie<sup>vii</sup> Inchbald seems to draw upon the tradition of English Restoration drama in order to create Miss Milner's character. Miss Milner, like Helena in Behn's *The Rover* (1677), is witty, passionate, subversive, and transgressive. Inchbald appears to celebrate Miss Milner, who prefers "passion over propriety (37). Furthermore, Inchbald, inheriting the tradition of amatory fiction,<sup>viii</sup> recuperates the topos of female desire (Lee 198). Lee argues that Miss Milner displays affinity with the passionate heroines of Behn, Manley, and Haywood as she also longs for what is forbidden and often violates the social and moral taboos (198). Unlike Rousseau in *The Confessions* (1782) and Goethe in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), Inchbald, creates a female desiring subject. This marks a historical shift as in the novels prior to Inchbald the desiring subject is mostly male.<sup>ix</sup> Inchbald not only problematizes gender roles but also inverts the gaze as Miss Milner passionately articulates her desire for her guardian who is a Catholic priest: "Oh...! I love him with all the passion of a mistress and with all the tenderness of a wife" (72). Inchbald explores the "disruptive potential of the female desire" (Spencer xv) as Miss Milner desires what is forbidden due to three reasons. Firstly, she violates the code of permissible feminine behaviour. Secondly, she desires Catholic priest who has taken vows of celibacy. Thirdly, she desires her guardian whom she had promised to "obey ...as her father" (13). Inchblad seems inspired by the model of "French eroticism" (Spencer xvii) as until now guardian-ward relationship in English fiction was not eroticized. Thus, Miss Milner challenges patriarchal, religious and social authority simultaneously.

Inchbald, like Rousseau, brings the body into the literary discourse. She describes Miss Milner's sexual awakening by showing a very physical response to her praise by Dorriforth: "the strong *glow* of joy, and of gratitude, for an opinion... so sincerely expressed, flew to Miss Milner's *face, neck*, and even her *hands* and *fingers*; the *blood* mounted to every part of her *skin*"(my emphasis 80). Instead of describing her thoughts, Inchbald describes how Miss Milner's body reacts. Such dramatic representations propelled Hazlitt to comment that "Mrs. Inchbald is an instance to confute the assertion of Rousseau that women fail whenever they attempt to describe passion of love...it is as if Venus had written books" (qtd.Clemit xi). Thus, Inchbald locates desire in the body of this sexualized heroine who is characterized by "strongest passions" (Boaden).<sup>x</sup> Miss Milner, who is not disembodied, thus, seems to be a precursor to passionate heroines in Victorian fiction like Jane in *Jane Eyre* and Catherine in *Wuthering Heights*.

Inchbald's focus on the body is not only a thematic concern but also influences the form of the novel. Her experience as theatre actress and a playwright helps her to deploy dramatic conventions like gestures and "signs" instead of lengthy descriptions in order to reveal the deepest feelings and psychological states of her characters. This makes the novel 'performative.' She writes "how unimportant...and ineffectual are words in conversation-looks and manners alone express" (17). Inchbald conveys Miss Milner's "embarrassment" (22) and sexual consciousness when Lord Frederrick quotes Pope's "Eloisa to Abelard" by

her gesture of leaning out of the window as she realizes the aptness of these lines which imply that she and Dorriforth are in love. Maria Edgeworth praises this dramatic quality of Inchbald's writing by arguing that it is "by leaving more than most other writers to the imagination that you succeed so eminently in affecting it. By the force that is necessary to repress feeling, we judge the intensity of the feeling ...You always contrive to give us by *intelligible* but *simple signs* the measure of this force" (qtd Clemit viii). In Inchbald's world, however, "bodily signs" are "radically ambiguous" (Spencer xvi) as the same signs can also conceal a character's real motives. For example, Miss Milner's blushing signifies her erotic feelings for Dorriforth but is misread by him as a sign of her feminine modesty when he questions her about her feelings for Lord Frederick.

Furthermore, desire, in the text, functions at more levels than one. Miss Milner is not only a sexually desiring subject but she also exhibits desire for independence at both social and personal level and has wit and intelligence to espouse a belief in different set of values regarding love and marriage. She desires to have the freedom to choose her husband for the idea of a loveless marriage is unacceptable to her. She declares that "Miss Fenton may marry from obedience, I never will" (85). Moreover, she is a disruptive figure who uses both speech and silence to subvert "the unpleasant voice of control" (28). She denies Dorriforth the authority to "judge, punish or... forgive" and decide her fate by "simply not confessing her most private desires to him" when he coerces her to tell him whom she loves (Lott 654). This refusal on her part to confess is significant since "confession" is theorized by Michel Foucault as "the obligatory and exhaustive expression of an individual secret." Foucault argues that "the confession ...is a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without a presence ...of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile..." (qtd in Lott 654). Thus, Miss Milner deploys silence as a weapon in order to exercise agency in the face of gender, class and religious suppression.

In addition to this, after her engagement Miss Milner acts not like Dorriforth's submissive ward but wants to extend the period of courtship as she is aware that this is only time when she can exercise maximum power over him. She declares that when he commands her as a "guardian" or a "husband" she could "obey him" but "as a lover, [she] will not" (154). Ty argues that in Kristeva's terms Miss Milner represents the "semiotic pulsations which are constantly erupting and disrupting the orderly symbolic structure" (88). Miss Milner seeks to threaten the masculine world by asserting power over her fiancé. She resists the patriarchal authority's attempt to confine her within the bounds of ideal/ permissible feminine behaviour by going to the masquerade despite Dorriforth's prohibition to do so. She dresses as Diana<sup>xi</sup> in a dress and boots that make her look "ambiguously sexual and sexually ambiguous" (Castle 311) to the extent that the servants cannot decide if she was dressed as a male or a female: "... the buskins, and the petticoat made to festoon far above the ankle...had...the appearance of a female...less virtuous" (155). Inchbald's deployment of Diana has multiple, probably conflicting, connotations. Dressed like the Goddess of chastity, Miss Milner surprisingly seeks to assert both her sexuality and independence. In the eighteenth century Diana is "seen as a profoundly disturbing embodiment of female power" as she is the huntress and protectress of wild animals along with being the Goddess of Chastity. Diana who represents "autonomous female sexuality" (Castle 312) surprisingly enables Miss Milner to assert both her sexuality and independence in a single stroke. Thus, Miss Milner's choice of Diana nudges one to consider her as someone who is empowered, sexually autonomous and, exists outside the bounds of domesticity.

Like the figure of Diana, the trope of the Masquerade functions at multiple levels. Firstly, it serves as a ground where "masculine will and female desire contend" (Castle 309).

If Miss Milner is driven by will to assert independence then Dorriforth, who has “shades of evil...obstinacy” (33), desires to control her actions and destiny. Dorriforth enquires the servants about her dress, rather than her behaviour. Thus, one detects a hint of Foucauldian notion of control and repression where the subject is kept under constant surveillance. Secondly, in the eighteenth century masquerade was associated not only with sexual freedom for women but also with political equality (Clemit xx). Dorriforth/ Lord Elmwood represents aristocracy, thus, it seems that Inchbald reveals her affinity with revolutionary politics by showing Miss Milner’s rebellion to attend the masquerade. Moreover, Inchbald’s critique of aristocracy is also evident in her depiction of the change in Dorriforth’s character as in Jacobin fiction the villain is generally an aristocrat. Dorriforth becomes tyrannical, unjust and hard hearted only after he becomes the feudal lord. He begins to exercise arbitrary power on his subordinates like Rushbrook, Matilda, the gardener and even his former teacher, Sandford.

Inchbald’s radicalism can further be seen in her deviation from the dominant (didactic) literary tradition of the reformed heroine.<sup>xii</sup> Instead of the heroine, she makes the hero undergo a “sentimental education,” first by Miss Milner and later by his daughter, Matilda (Clemit xxii). His training as a priest which had made him unfit for love is undone: “the grave, austere ...priest” is transformed by the force of the erotic desire into impassioned “slave of love” (138). Later, when he is cuckolded by Miss Milner “the good, tender Dorriforth” becomes “a head hearted tyrant” exemplifying “injustice” (195). It is significant to note that Dorriforth, unlike Sandford seems to fail in his clerical education as he fails to forgive repentant Miss Milner especially because Catholicism believes in repentance leading to Confession results in forgiveness. Dorriforth, unlike Miss Milner, represses his desires. He vows never to behold Matilda. Nevertheless, Dorriforth’s care for Matilda is revealed when he selects books for her reading: “...he warned...against some and selected others...as a ...fond father for his darling child” (272). This simile is a kind of “deliberate Freudian slip” with which Inchbald “penetrates to the heart of Elmwood’s futile attempts to repress feeling” (Kelly 76). This instance is significant not only for understanding Dorriforth’s character and failure of his Clerical education, but also because through this Inchbald leads us directly into the eighteenth debate about what constitutes an ideal education for women.

One needs to problematize Gary Kelly’s reading of the text in terms of the binary opposition between “the errors of an ill-educated woman,” namely Miss Milner, and “the positive benefits” of Matilda’s “academic training” (72).<sup>xiii</sup> Educated at a Protestant boarding school, Miss Milner, “the woman of fashion” (6), is adept at “frivolous qualifications” (5)<sup>xiv</sup> but lacks “something essential” that would teach her self-restrain and rational behavior. One needs to read this more critically in order to highlight a disruptive potential that lurks beneath this seemingly “simple” moral trajectory. Miss Milner has not received “a proper education.” This indicates the absence of “any prescriptive rendering of female socialization” (Castle301) as “education in this novel functions negatively, not adding wisdom but imposing taboos” (Spencer xv). Thus, Miss Milner can desire Dorriforth because she has not been educated as a Catholic otherwise her education “would have given” a “prohibition to her love” (72). Miss Milner’s death is usually attributed to her wrong education. Viewed in this light, one wonders if Inchbald seems to suggest that Miss Milner, who is a disruptive character like Julie,<sup>xv</sup> has to die because society cannot accept a woman who desires.

Unlike Miss Milner, Matilda, “educated in the school of adversity,” has “excellent understanding” that helps her to bear her misfortunes with resignation (203). However, Matilda’s education also appears to be lacking as it fails to make her financially independent<sup>xvi</sup> and causes her great anxiety till she’s given shelter by Elmwood after her

mother's death. The text ends with an emphatic conclusion that women should have a "Proper Education" but what this "Proper Education" is remains debatable.

Although recent critical opinion lauds the *A Simple Story* as an "anti-authoritarian" text which "insistently satirizes conventionality, self-restriction, physical and psychic inhibition" (Castle 290), it does so by focusing largely on the rebellious character of Miss Milner while typecasting Matilda as a passive character who has "intellectual resources that her mother lacked" but is "no exemplar of female independence" (Clemit xviii). Spenser, similarly, argues that "Matilda, unlike her mother...does not challenge authority or assert her desires; and unlike her mother ends happily.... All the troubling questions raised by Miss Milner are laid to rest by Lady Matilda, a submissive and properly feminine father's daughter" (xx). Other critics like Rogers and Ty also argue that she is finally accepted by her father as unlike her mother, she is "passive," "submissive" and non-threatening to the paternal order" (Ty 86). I, however, wish to argue that if one reads closely an alternative reading also emerges. Matilda may appear to be passive at first glance but she is also disruptive in her own way. She is not 'active' in an articulate fashion like Miss Milner as she probably masks her desires. Like Miss Milner, Matilda desires what is forbidden for her. She as a desiring subject appears to be more transgressive as she desires not her guardian but her own father. One detects a hint of Electra complex as she "swoons"<sup>xvii</sup> and faints in the arms of her father, who in turn addresses her as Miss Milliner. Matilda's intense longing for Dorriforth is revealed in her obsessively gazing at his things like his hat, pen, chair books and portrait. Castle argues that "Matilda's story represents not a disavowal but an internalization of the carnivalesque" as the "transformational energy of the masquerade in the second half moves into the private world of the bourgeois household, and on a subjective level, into the realm of individual psychology" (325-6). The transgressive space is located not outside but inside the house, therefore, the manner of resistance also changes.

Matilda also seems to problematize conventional gender roles as she has "manly resentment" of her father and "her voice unman[s] him" (273) when he first holds her. Ultimately he has to accept her against his initial declaration to do so. Thus, castle reads her as an "anti-authoritarian" writer as she shows the victory of female desire (both of Miss Milner and Matilda) over masculine authority. Moreover, Matilda does not behave "passively" in her interaction with other male characters like Rushbrook and Margrave. She feels competitive and envious of Rushbrook who she thinks has usurped what rightfully belonged to her- her father's love and property. Thus, she spurns his advances.<sup>xviii</sup> Also, even though she is kidnapped by Margrave, like Clarissa,<sup>xix</sup> she refuses to submit to his authority. She defiantly refuses to eat or even change her dress. On seeing Margrave, she forgets her "weakness" and "want of power" and cries "with her voice elevated "leave me...or I'll die in spite of all your care" (327). Thus, Matilda also shows resistance at different points though appears to be passive and submissive on the surface.

This kind of covert resistance is also deployed by Inchbald in her own Preface to the novel as she dons the guise of a suffering woman who is writing out of "necessity" (2). Nonetheless, she actually ventures into the forbidden domain of the republic of letters and writes a radical text. Notably, Inchbald was never attacked by anti-Jacobins like Wollstonecraft was.<sup>xx</sup> This might have been because Inchbald successfully masked her radicalism. Studied in this light one is propelled to inquire whether Matilda is able to survive and achieve a happy ending due to her "correct education" or dexterity in masking her disruptive tendencies. Thus, one can conclude by saying that Inchbald exhibits her radicalism by exploring the disruptive potential of the female desiring subject. She also problematizes the conventional definitions of femininity, masculinity, activity, passivity and the ideal education for women.

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<sup>i</sup> Janet Todd in *The Sign of Angellica: Women Writing and Fiction, 1660-1800*, 2. Todd's argument is about the trajectory of women's writing form late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century.

<sup>ii</sup> Terry Castle in *Masquerade and Civilization*, 220.

<sup>iii</sup> These lines have been taken from Boaden's *Memoir's of Mrs. Inchbald*, 7.

<sup>iv</sup> *Moll Flanders* (1722) is a novel by Daniel Defoe. Moll deploys her intelligence and sexuality to attain financial security and the right kind of life partner for herself.

<sup>v</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft's *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and Maria Edgeworth's *Practical Education* (1798) were some of the other texts of the period that dealt with the issue of education of women.

<sup>vi</sup> Heroines of the novel of sentimentality (like Richardson's *Clarissa*) are flawless, chaste, prudent and delicate. Wollstonecraft resents the fact that in the eighteenth century fiction the heroes are allowed to be "mortals" but heroines are supposed to be "immaculate" (qtd in Fairchild 80).

<sup>vii</sup> Rousseau in *Julie, or the New Heloise* (1761) creates a female desiring subject, Julie, who has a passionate love relationship with her teacher, Saint- Preux.

<sup>viii</sup> The genre of amatory fiction was popular during the late seventeenth and eighteenth century in England. Rather than dealing with the issues of women's socialization or education, it was concerned with the representation of female desire, sexual love and romance. Eliza Haywood, Delarivier Manley, and Aphra Behn were the three most important writers of the genre.

<sup>ix</sup> For instance, *Clarissa* and *Pamela* are both objects of desire of Lovelace and Mr. B in Richardson's *Clarissa, or, the History of a Young Lady* (1748) and *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740), respectively.

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<sup>x</sup> The contemporary reviews of the novel described it as “a story complicated with powerful character and strongest passions” (Boaden 275).

<sup>xi</sup> Diana, the Roman Goddess, was a huntress and protector of virgins and wild animals. She has always had “associations with ancient matriarchy and cults of the mother goddess” (Castle 312).

<sup>xii</sup> Spencer observes that “the central women’s tradition” in the eighteenth century was that of the didactic tradition of reformed heroines, in which a faulty heroine is reformed by her lover-mentor (Lee 30).

<sup>xiii</sup> Kelly argues: “The first two volumes of *A Simple Story* dwell on the errors of an ‘ill-educated’ woman’ but the second part restores the balance ...by showing the positive results of an academic and stoical training in ...Matilda” (72).

<sup>xiv</sup> These refer to opening the ball or holding a witty conversation, and being well adept in social graces.

<sup>xv</sup> Clarissa is the heroine of Richardson’s novel *Clarissa or, the History of a Young Lady* (1748) and Julie is the protagonist in Rousseau’s *Julie; ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761).

<sup>xvi</sup> In “Thoughts on the Education of Daughters” Wollstonecraft talks about the plight of women, like Matilda, who are educated but left without a fortune: “They face difficulty in living respectfully” as “few are the modes of earning and those very humiliating. Perhaps to be a humble companion to some rich old cousin.... A teacher at a school is only a kind of upper servant, who has more work than menial ones. A governess to young ladies is equally disagreeable...” (33).

<sup>xvii</sup> Many a times, fainting and swooning in the conventional romantic literature connotes sexual ecstasy.

<sup>xviii</sup> Matilda tells Rushbrook that even if he enters her thoughts it will be as an object of envy.

<sup>xix</sup> Clarissa in Richardson’s novel refuses to marry Lovelace even after he rapes her.

<sup>xx</sup> Anti- Jacobins like Richard Polwhele attacked explicitly radical writers like Mary Hays and Wollstonecraft as the “unsexed revolutionaries.”